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SPLIT-TWIG FIGURINES FROM NEWBERRY CAVE

A PREHISTORIC HUNTING MAGIC SITE IN THE MOJAVE DESERT

The Newberry Cave site, located in the Newberry Mountains, southeast of Barstow, California, was excavated in the 1950s by Dr. Gerald Smith, Director and later Archaeology Curator at the San Bernardino County Museum. The artifacts from the site include 11 complete or nearly complete split-twig figurines similar to the one pictured above.

Split-twig figurines were made by splitting a willow twig, leaving one end intact, and then twisting the two pieces into the shapes of large animals such as deer, antelopes, and bighorn sheep.

Made between 2,000 and 4,000 years ago, they may represent hunting magic, which calls the animal to the hunter or permits the hunter to easily find and kill the animal. Some of the figurines have been formed around projectile points, symbolizing the "kill." One of the figurines at Newberry Cave is formed around a flake.

Newberry Cave marks the western-most site at which these artifacts have been found and the only interior California site. Other examples have been found along the Colorado River near the Grand Canyon.

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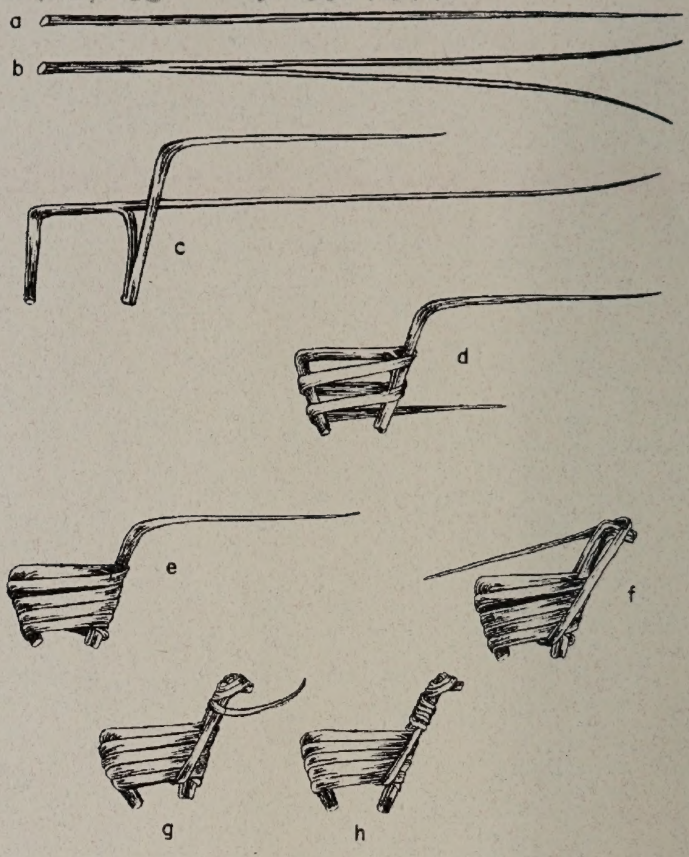
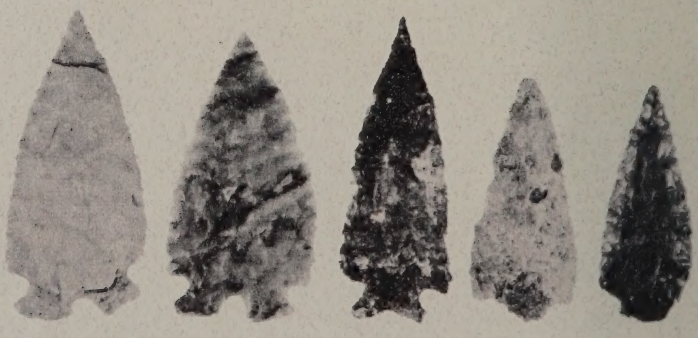


How Some Split-Twig Figurines are Made.
(With the permission of G.A. Smith, 2000)

Split-twig figurines are made in several ways with variation in (1) the types of front and back legs, (2) the types of neck, head, and snout construction, and (3) the number of vertical over wrappings around the body. Seven of the figures from the Newberry Cave exhibit construction details found only at Newberry Cave.

In addition to the split-twig figurines, other perishable items from the site include dart shafts, wooden awls, fire drill sets, sandal pads, cordage, leather thongs and painted pieces, sinew, and wand and atlatl fragments.

The major hunting weapon of the period was the dart-and-atlatl (or throwing stick). The stone points on the darts are larger



Adapted from Davis and Smith (1981:26-27)

than arrow points and include several types: Elko series

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points, Gypsum points, large triangular points, and straight-stemmed points.

The interior of the cave also contains numerous pictographs (painted figures on the cave wall). These were made using four colors: green, black, red, and white. The use of green paint is atypical for this area of the western United States. These pictograph styles are different from any others in California. Although they include some motifs similar to the Great Basin Painted style, the animals depicted in the art are not part of that style. Radiocarbon dates on various perishable items recovered

Rock Art Panels
Adapted from Davis and Smith (1981:84-85)

from the site range from 2970±250 to 3765±100 radiocarbon years ago (approximately 1020 BC to 2815 BC).

The cave was probably used by hunters led by a shaman or a hunters' society. They performed magico-religious ceremonies that would insure them of success in the hunt. Very few artifacts were found that would suggest women's activities. The vast majority centered around hunting and men's activities. The location on a steep hillside would insure them of privacy, away from females' eyes.

This is an exceptional Southern California site and part of the cultural heritage of San Bernardino County. Because of its significant rock art, figurines, and other artifact assemblages,

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it is important to preserve the site and the artifacts. The cave is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and is protected by federal law. It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The collection was described in an article by Gerald Smith and Charles Davis and more comprehensively by Davis for his Master's Thesis. The figurines and associated artifacts are curated at the San Bernardino County Museum and some of these can be seen during the museum's operating hours: Tuesday through Sunday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. For information, time and dates of operation, and directions to the museum, call (909)-307-2669, (888)-bird-egg, or visit www.sbcountymuseum.org.

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A Cooperative Effort Between

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County of San Bernardino

Davis, C. Alan, and Gerald A. Smith, 1981, *Newberry Cave*. San Bernardino County Museum Association, Redlands.

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